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AUTHOR Kurfiss, Joanne
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ABSTRACT

Studies on the Writing Across the Curriculum program indicate that writing is a valuable learning tool, and that writing about a specific content area presents unique problems which are best addressed by the content specialist. Two assumptions underlie this program: (1) writing can help students learn and think about content in any discipline, thus helping to achieve the goals of the instructor; and (2) writing used for learning does not require explicit teaching of writing--only the use of writing as a pedagogical tool. This highlights writing for the discipline's sake, not writing for its own sake. One characteristic of writing used in this way is that most or it is not graded, and only some of it is even examined by the instructor. Notetaking, "microthemes," and short essay study questions are helpful Writing Across the Curriculum strategies. One objection to Writing Across the Curriculum addresses the question of student motivation to complete non-graded assignments. However, once students see that they are writing for a clearly defined purpose related to their ultimate course grade, they are likely to complete the assignment. Writing instructors are not suggesting that professors in other disciplines teach writing; rather, they are asking other instructors to extend their efforts for the sake of all disciplines and students' success in them. (Ten references are appended.) (MM)

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by

Joanne Kurfiss

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Joanne Kurfiss
Center for Teaching Effectiveness
University of Delaware
Newark, DE 19716

DO STUDENTS REALLY LEARN FROM WRITING?

By Joanne Kurfiss

Professor Simon Stricklen, Jr., offering "A Note of Caution" in the May 1985 issue of *Writing Across the Curriculum*, is rightly concerned that a movement which is gaining so much ascendency may ultimately prove to be simply another academic fad. He raises several provocative questions, probably the most important of which is whether students will benefit from all the writing they are now being urged to do. That question can be answered from empirical evidence, but before going into that, I would like to suggest that Professor Stricklen's own philosophy about using writing is closer to the basic tenets of this pedagogy than he may realize. In fact, his own conclusion puts it well: "We ought to assign writing where it fits naturally." Writing Across the Curriculum is a program intended not to "push" writing "artificially," but to broaden and deepen our conceptions of where writing "fits naturally."

Dr. Stricklen's first paragraph reveals an understandable misconception: that the objective of Writing Across the Curriculum is to require writing to be examined by the instructor. From this, his other concerns flow quite readily: writing must be the "paramount" skill, everyone will have to teach it and not everyone is qualified to do so, and it will take time away from course content. Let me suggest two alternative foundational propositions: (1) Writing can help students learn and think about content in any discipline, thus helping to achieve the goals of the instructor. (2) Writing used for learning does not require explicit *teaching* of writing--only *use* of writing as a pedogogical tool.

These assumptions lead to a model of Writing Across the Curriculum very different from the image evoked by Dr. Stricklen. This model highlights not writing *for its own sake*, but writing *for the discipline's sake*, i.e., writing for content mastery. One characteristic of writing used in this way is that most of it is *not* graded, and only some of it is even "examined" by the instructor. Take the case of notes on reading. Research on reading has demonstrated that notetaking aids content recall more than underlining (Kulhavy, Dyer, and Silver). Encouraging students to take notes on their reading, just as they do on lecture, is an unobtrusive yet helpful Writing Across the Curriculum strategy. Showing them some "trick of the trade" for notetaking in your field may make their notes even more helpful.

Another writing-for-learning strategy is to assign short essays for various purposes. Essay writing can be used to help students learn from reading, and is more effective than notetaking (see below). Writing short essays can also be used to help students prepare for class discussions, and students are more likely to do them if the topic relates to material that will figure prominently on an exam. Assignments may also be structured to provide practice for essay exams, or to build a foundation for a position paper or other, longer writing assigments normally used in the course. Students can be encouraged, in class or out, to exchange their essays and respond to them before turning them in to you. Such exchanges, structured so that criteria are clear and emphasis is on ideas rather than grammar, give individual students an opportunity to see how others are making sense of the course content, and can stimulate clarifying discussions unobtainable through other means. To motivate the grade-conscious, you can award a check or a few points for turning in the essay. Do you have to read the essays? Not necessarily, though you may find it useful to look them over. When students see that they are writing for a clearly defined *purpose* related to their ultimate course grade, they are likely to complete the assignment even though it is not read or evaluated by the instructor.

However, as Dr. Stricklen suggests, many students see no value in completing assignments not specifically read and evaluated by the instructor. The "microtheme," a short, highly structured essay, can be graded fairly easily (Bean, Drenk and Lee; Kirkpatrick and Pittendrigh). Developed at Montana State University for use in large introductory physics courses, microthemes can support instruction in any discipline. Microthemes require students to figure out in writing a problem posed by the instructor. The problem is designed to assess students' ability to apply a fundamental concept or to use a particular cognitive skill, such as drawing conclusions from data. Students write their responses on a 5 x 8 index card. To facilitate grading, students summarize their answer in a single sentence at the top of the card. You can leaf through dozens of these cards in a very short time, jotting down comments on *your* note pad, not the students' cards, as you see common misconceptions emerging, or fresh solutions you would like to highlight in class. If someone offers a totally "off-the-wall" response, you can set the card aside for individual comment when you're done--often a short note will do. While you're not after mechanics or spelling here, there is a premium on clarity and brevity, challenging students to think clearly. If a response is incomprehensible, return the card with an appropriate message (e.g., "Get thee to the writing center" or "Please make your next microtheme readable"). Next day, you can discuss the responses as a whole, pointing out the misconceptions identified, and answering remaining questions. But won't some students "cheat"? If they copy each other's work, you'll probably notice it. But if they get together and talk through the solution, then write their own, where's the harm? You've increased their academic "time-on-task" far more than the time it costs you to read over their solution. And in general, more time-on-task means more learning.

Microthemes and short-essay study questions may not be appropriate in all courses, but neither do they begin to exhaust the options available to the teacher who wants to help students master content through writing. Some teachers use journals to help students clarify concepts by trying to express them in writing, or to explore controversial material, or to keep records of ideas for a major paper. Some teachers pause in the middle of a lecture to have students write down questions stimulated by the topic; these can be turned in or discussed right then. Additional suggestions can be found in a delightful booklet, "The Busy Professor's Travel Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum" (Barry, also in Griffin).

I hope Professor Stricklen will agree that such uses of writing are both natural and helpful, and that they focus on *content* rather than on the writing itself. Of course, as students write in a variety of settings, occasionally free of grade pressures, some of their anxiety about writing may dissipate, and their formal writing may also improve as they become accustomed to developing ideas on paper. Such improvements need not be the primary goal, although they might help counteract a self-perpetuating problem: student avoidance of courses requiring writing. Recent research suggests that students who are apprehensive about writing prefer classes in which they can just " 'read and take notes. Then you can just put back down on paper what they give you.' " (a college student quoted in Selfe, 57). How many of us have felt pressured to avoid writing assignments in the face of such attitudes on the part of our students? Selfe's research shows how these attitudes perpetuate themselves. She found that apprehensive writers have limited writing histories, i.e., they do little writing in high school outside their English classes. For such students apprehension fosters avoidance which limits opportunities for the practice needed to overcome the apprehension. Unfortunately, it turns out that *most* students have limited writing histories; Applebee found high school students' writing limited to a paragraph or less in all but about 3 per cent of their assignments. The apprehension that can result from such limited writing experiences may drastically limit students' learning options and ability to succeed both in school and beyond.

I hope also that my examples help answer the question, "Do students learn from writing?" But these illustrations can only be suggestive, and Dr. Stricklen has wisely challenged Writing Across the Curriculum enthusiasts to cite hard evidence that writing aids learning or thinking. While research on this question is still in its infancy, several recent studies suggest that writing is a valuable learning tool. For example, Kirkpatrick and Pittendrigh report that beginning physics students who wrote microthemes each week performed significantly better on hourly essay exams than students who had not had such practice. Responses were clearer and easier to grade, and there were fewer "wretched answers" (163). Furthermore, poor essays resulted from problems in understanding physics, not from deficient writing skills. And far from objecting to the extra work (20-60 minutes per essay), all but two students surveyed believed the amount of homework in the course was just right or too little. Most important, however, is that students perceived writing as a tool for mastering content: 38 out of 43 students surveyed believed that writing essays "has helped them understand the physics" (163).

Further support for a learning-from-writing hypothesis comes from two studies recently completed at Stanford. Langer (in press) and Newell (1984) had high school students read typical academic passages and then "study" either by taking notes, answering study questions in writing, or writing short "thought-question" essays. In both cases, topic knowledge increased far more for students who wrote essays than for students in either of the other two conditions: they knew more, and they had a more integrated concept of the material if they wrote essays. Further, the thinking processes evoked by essay writing were more complex and varied. For example, Langer found dramatically higher levels of hypothesizing, and also more instances of evaluating information or ideas, more comments on how to get at meaning, and more examples of "finding evidence and validating previous interpretations." These are among the sophisticated thinking processes colleges claim to develop in their students. These studies suggest that through writing used as a tool for learning, the claim can become an actuality rather than a vague hope.

Writing instructors are not suggesting that professors in other disciplines do their job for them. Rather, they are asking us to support and extend their efforts, not because of some inherent value in writing, but for the sake of our own disciplines and students' success in them. Writing about a specific content area presents unique problems which writing teachers acknowledge they are not qualified to address--only the content specialist is intimately familiar with the genres, conventions and audiences peculiar to her field. If students don't practice discipline-specific writing in college, where will they learn it? What roles in the working world will allow them to simply "put back down on paper what they give you?" The workplace is risky enough without leaving students on their own to learn the essential skill of communicating in writing. It is ironic that college professors in a variety of disciplines now acknowledge that writing is more important to success in the workplace than to success in college (Bridgeman and Carlson). Perhaps it's time we evened things out.

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Joanne Kurfiss is Director of Instructional Development at Weber State College in Utah. She holds a doctorate in developmental psychology from the University of Washington, and is currently on sabbatical doing research on intellectual development, writing, and collaborative learning at Montana State University.